

PERTUSSIS

FACTSHEET

WHOOPING COUGH

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Preventive Health Services Administration
825 North Capitol St, N.E. Third Floor
Washington, D.C. 20002
(202) 442-5842/9371 * Fax (202) 442-8060

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious disease involving the respiratory tract (lungs). A bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis* causes this infection.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Young children and infants may have a more severe illness, especially if they have not received at least three doses of the pertussis vaccine.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread person to person by direct contact with respiratory droplets from the nose and throat of infected individuals. This frequently occurs when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially, symptoms resemble those of a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of numerous rapid coughs followed by a crowing or high-pitched whoop. A thick, clear mucus may be discharged. These episodes may recur for one to two months, and are more frequent at night. Older people or partially immunized children generally have milder symptoms.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually five to 10 days but may be as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

A person can spread pertussis from seven days following exposure to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. A person is considered no longer contagious when they have completed at least five days of appropriate antibiotic therapy, assuming they are 100% compliant with taking their medication.

What are the complications associated with pertussis?

Complications of pertussis may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy (disorders of the brain), apneic episodes (brief cessation of breathing) and even death.

Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

The vaccine for pertussis is usually given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. The recommended schedule is for DTP or DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis) vaccine to be given at two, four, six and 15 months of age and between four and six years of age. The vaccine is not licensed for use in persons seven years and older. Protection from the vaccine decreases as we age.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community. Treatment of cases with certain antibiotics can shorten the contagious period.

Want more information?

Additional information about Pertussis and other related health care topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-5842.

12.04



Government of the
District of Columbia
Anthony A. Williams, Mayor

